



European Economic and Social Committee

9th meeting of the India-EU Round Table

SPEECH

by

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Check Against Delivery

Dear Co-chairman, Mr Vohra

Dear representatives of the Indian government
and the European Commission

Dear representatives of Indian civil society

Dear colleagues,

It is a great pleasure to meet you here in India
on the occasion of the 9th meeting of the EU-
India Round Table.

It is the first meeting that I will be co-chairing
in India. This is a great honour.

It is also the first meeting of our Round Table
since that awful calamity struck South East
Asia and India at the end of last year.

I cannot help thinking about the victims and
their families, and the terrible consequences
the Tsunami had for the inhabitants of the
devastated regions.

In the aftermath of the disaster, India showed great solidarity towards the people affected in all countries.

India's attitude was truly admirable.

That is why, before we proceed with our work, I wish to congratulate you on your efforts.

I would like to thank our Indian co-chairman, Mr Vohra, for once more giving us the opportunity to discover one of the regions of India.

For the majority of us it is our first visit to the state of Andhra Pradesh and a splendid opportunity to discover new facets of India, its cultural wealth and to meet outstanding personalities of local civil society.

Meeting and getting to know each other, I believe, is a crucial element in the Round Table's activities.

Our meeting takes place barely a few days after the annual summit between India and the European Union.

We would be well advised to study and comment on the results of that summit in detail during our meeting.

I very much welcome the adoption of a joint action plan, which, I am sure, will allow us to implement the new strategic partnership between India and the EU in a very ambitious way.

The co-chairman, Mr Vohra, and myself forwarded to our respective authorities our suggestions for the drawing-up of the action plan based on the recommendations made by the Round Table in the course of its last eight meetings.

I was pleased to discover that a large number of these recommendations have been implemented by our governments.

I am also pleased that the action plan acknowledges the essential role played by our Round Table, and that it stresses the need to continue the work being carried out here, and integrate it better into the institutional architecture of EU-India relations.

Indeed, the action plan underlines the general need to involve civil society more in bilateral relations between India and the EU.

Nonetheless, I regret that the individual thematic chapters of the action plan, with the exception of the chapter on the environment, do not give greater recognition of the role civil society could play in those relations.

I am convinced that civil society as a whole, and our Round Table in particular, have an essential role to play in ensuring that the partnership is a success.

The vibrant forces of society which we represent are the first to be affected by the policies, agreements and efforts at cooperation pursued by India and the Union.

We must, therefore, make sure that we become even more involved in the development of India-EU relations and that the opinions of civil society representatives are heard in all thematic or sector-based exchanges that take place.

The chapter dedicated to the environment, which recommends establishing a forum, involving representatives of civil society, business and academia, should serve as a model.

This kind of civil society involvement would also be appropriate for the majority of the other areas covered by the action plan, for example the development of clean technologies, alternative sources of energy and the fight against AIDS.

Finally, the action plan calls for greater cooperation between trade unions, business organisations, universities, organisations of civil society, non-government organisations and think tanks.

These are areas in which the Round Table and its members have an important role to play, and I encourage each one of you to promote such cooperation in the context of our joint activities.

Today, and up until Tuesday, we have a very full agenda in which we will be coming back to the recommendations by the Round Table within the strategic partnership.

We shall also aim to establish what the priority topics at our upcoming meetings will be. I recommend selecting a limited number of topics that are both realistic and concrete, and would give the Round Table the opportunity to significantly improve relations between the EU and India.

I am thinking, in particular, of topics such as the environment, food safety or energy policy.

Culture is also an area which is close to my heart, and I truly hope that the Round Table will be able to contribute to the implementation of the joint declaration on culture which was adopted at the Hague Summit last November.

We will also look into the issue of cultural and religious pluralism in democratic societies and, in particular, into Muslim communities in India and the EU.

In preparation for this meeting, we held a colloquium on this subject at EESC headquarters last May.

This was attended by Mr Vohra and other members of the Round Table, as well as researchers and academics.

Our discussions were based on documents drawn up by Professor Zoya Hassan and my colleague Sukhdev Sharma.

Both will be presenting us with their work. This is a subject that requires sensitive treatment, where prejudice and generalisation need to be avoided.

It deserves to be discussed openly and we aim to contribute to the subject in a constructive way.

I note that the action plan also recommends initiating a dialogue on pluralism and diversity so as to facilitate an exchange of experience and knowledge in that area.

Cultural diversity is a key feature of the societies of both India and the EU.

Our Round Table was, in effect, a forerunner in that area and now, one week after the adoption of the action plan, we are ready to initiate this dialogue.

Finally, I come to a project that is very important to us: the internet forum.

I welcome the fact that the action plan emphasises the need for an internet forum open to civil society in the EU and India.

You will remember the decision was made that the technical side of this forum would be managed from India, and that each delegation would appoint a moderator to run the forum.

I am pleased to announce that, following a call for tender, we have selected a consultant to be our European moderator, and that the EESC has signed a contract to that effect.

This means that we are now ready to put the consultant in touch with the Indian moderator in order to launch the project.

I am sure, Mr Co-chairman, we will have the opportunity to settle the final details with Mr Srivastav and Mr Sharma over the next two days.

I wish all of us success in our work and an excellent stay in Hyderabad.

Thank you for your attention.
